
CULTURE VERSUS COLONIALISM

IN AMERICA

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HAVING BEEN told many times that the future must be a strife between communism and fascism, a number of Americans are beginning to believe it. But their hearts are not given to either side; so the belief leads to pessimism, to the conviction that America is sold out and that there is nothing left to do but complain cleverly.

Such an attitude has the merit of completeness. It satisfies the part of the human mind that cries for an answer at any cost, even at the cost of suicide. But there is no excuse, as yet, for Americans to seek this shoddy comfort. We have a harder task and a more exciting. It is our job to save a corner of the world from the twin despotisms that encroach on Europe. If we do this we shall take a proud place in history. If we fail to do it we shall take no place at all; we shall just be a colony: a huge but awkward copy of the parent civilization.

If we are to seize our chance for greatness we must fight both the defeatism of the pessimists and the greedy optimism of those whose picture of a pretty future is a return to 1928. Our hope lies in the fact that we once had a political tradition which could give an answer in terms of freedom to this false fascist-or-communist dilemma. We have weakened that tradition shamefully, by taking its name in vain. We have betrayed it item by item while assuring each other that we were merely adapting it to the modern progress. It will not be easily revived today. Yet there is our job. All over the United States men are waking to that knowledge at last.

The first step toward reviving native America is to define it. And before it can be defined it has to be isolated. The "real" America, from which a native Culture can grow, has to be distinguished from colonial America which seeks only to copy Europe. The present essay tries to make this distinction even at the risk of overstating the differences.

During six years of living in England I learned one basic fact about my own country. I learned that the best traits in American life are not the traits we have copied faithfully from Europe but the traits we have freely adapted, or else originated—the traits which are our own. I learned that in so far as America is an imitation of Europe, she is not so good as the original. This merely means that in so far as we are a colonial race we share the usual shortcomings of colonialism. "Society" life in the big cities of America is an example. "Society" has of course become ridiculous all over the Western world. The bourgeois revolution of the nineteenth century, the rise of stock-market wealth to a power and prestige overshadowing landed wealth, doomed urban "society" to a comic-section end. But granting that it is absurd everywhere, "society" in New York or Chicago is more absurd than in London. In London, something that once had dignity and purpose has grown sick and silly; in Chicago something sick and silly has been carefully improvised. A colonial status is a poor one at best; it becomes abject in a period when the model is not worth copying.

Modern American art offers a similar example. In so far as our art is a copy of French Modernism, it is colonial and inferior. As Mr. Thomas Craven writes:

Those who regard art as modish decoration, as inarticulate embellishment, have every reason to favor French Modernism, and every incentive to buy it. And it is more sensible to buy the original manufactures than the American imitations. Truly, they order these material things better in France. In the exhibition at the Chicago Fair, the French painters of the modern School of Paris made the American painters attached to that school look seedy and second-rate.

But there is another American art, such as that of Mr. Thomas Hart Benton, which has nothing to do with French Modernism, with Bohemia's abstract aloofness from Europe's passion and despair. This other art deals

with American life; for side by side with our colonialism there is an America which makes an original contribution to the culture of Christendom.

The Colonial mind at its silliest is shown in our veneration for French cooking. Even in the South, where our native cooking will bear comparison with the cooking of any land, it is almost impossible in a first-class hotel to get anything but base imitations of the French. In a city of Tennessee, a hotel has carried this tendency one step further than is usual: over the door of its grillroom is a large sign reading *Le Grillé*. But even in this somberly named room, with its suggestion of a roasted heretic, the French cooking is vile and the American cooking does not exist. Presumably, the hotel managers know their business. Presumably, the traveling American public wants Parisian dishes even if they are always limp and tasteless, rather than American dishes to which the local cooks could do justice. But if this is true, the traveling public is colonial minded.

II

The town of Sheridan,* in the Middle West, illustrates the two Americas, and also the half-conscious fight taking place between them—a fight that will determine our future.

Sheridan is a suburb of one of our giant cities. Its population increased from thirty-seven thousand in 1920 to sixty-three thousand in 1930. But Sheridan is not yet "suburban." Having a strong local pride it has thus far kept its own identity. It has not become merely another dormitory to the giant city. It still has the character of a Middle Western small town. But it will not have this character for long, if recent tendencies continue unchecked into the future. For Sheridan is living on its spiritual capital. It is using the virtues that are left over from the past rather than tending the soil from which these virtues grew. Native America will not win its fight unless it grows more conscious of the danger, more vigilant in defence.

The most striking feature of life in Sheridan is that a feeling of equality is still almost universal, at least among the whites. It is an unforced equality, which is so widely accepted that it does not need to call attention to itself. A delivery-boy will meet the wife of a college professor on the street, and will wave his hand at her and call out, "Hello there, Mrs. Holt, you're look-

* This is a real town, which I am calling by a made-up name because I am using the town for what is typical in it, not for what is individual.

ing just fine today." The clerk at the grocery store will say, "Good morning, Mrs. Holt. Why, you've washed your hair." And the ice-man will find Mrs. Holt digging in her garden, and will stop to tell her, "Don't plant your tulips there—it's too shady. Plant them over by that wall, where they'll have a chance to grow."

Social democracy of this sort is of course widespread in rural America. But there are few towns, and fewer suburbs to great cities, where it still is dominant. And in the big cities themselves it is giving way more and more to a nasty caricature of equality: a defensive smartness that has none of the virtues of equality and none of the virtues of a class-system.

Relations between people of different incomes, backgrounds, and education can be made smooth either by the institution of equality or by the institution of social classes. Either will work agreeably; either will promote human dignity. The one thing that will not work agreeably is a mixture of the two, which often occurs in American big cities. When you get into a New York taxicab wearing a top hat your driver may be a friendly soul who assumes that in spite of your clothes you are human. In that case he will give you a trial, and at the next red light will start on murder, politics, or the strange habits of the taxi-riding public. On the other hand, your driver is quite likely to be a man who not only believes in classes but who believes, reasonably enough, that his own class is unenviable. The sight of your top hat will not soothe him. He will make it clear that he thinks you neither useful nor pretty. For with the exception of the small group of trained domestic servants, the American who is class conscious has become so in order to vent a grievance, commonly a just grievance, against society. He therefore gets no comfort from the American system of equality, and no comfort from the foreign system of classes.

The Englishman, on the other hand, who believes he has a "place," who can define that "place" exactly, and who respects it, does not feel hampered by the class-system; he feels protected. He has been given a form, or fiction, with the help of which he can deal comfortably with people who are very different from himself. Go into a "pub" in an English village and the crowd in the bar-parlor will fall silent. You may think they are silent out of respect for your exalted position. That was what a friend of mine thought (he is professor of history at an American university), and he was indignant

at such servility. He should have saved his anger. The English countryman is unimpressed by shiny shoes or city clothes. The silence is curiosity. And so far from finding the stranger an object of awe, the company is judging him. First they want to classify him; then they want to know whether they like him. If they do, and he has enough information to join in their talk, he will find how class distinctions can smoothe out social intercourse. And if they don't like him he will find what a clear and splendid difference there is between being granted "superior" social position and being looked up to, or even tolerated.

The English system is just as good a way of securing ease and stability in social relations as is the American system. Each system is a fundamental social institution, affecting the whole life of the community. Each system is a factor in the culture of the country where it has been established. Each system, while working healthily, ensures against class consciousness in the Marxian sense. But neither system, today, is working healthily. The American system, like the English, is living on momentum from the past, and may die with the present generation unless the conditions that bred the system are kept alive.

It is heartening to find Sheridan preserving its social democracy on the doorstep of a giant city where "equality" has no meaning at all, where a landless, toolless Marxian proletariat faces a Marxian bourgeoisie. There are several reasons why Sheridan has been able to do this. In the first place, it has kept a high standard in its public schools. Practically all the children of the town, therefore, are sent to these schools, so that the boy who grows up to be an ice-man and the girl who grows up to be the wife of a college professor may have sat side by side in class. This is often said to be customary in America; but it has long been quite uncustomary among people who, like many citizens of Sheridan, could afford to send their children to private school.

In the second place, there is no class of very rich people in Sheridan, and hardly any very poor. Though there is a wide range of income, there is no fantastic gulf of the sort that makes "equality" a joke. In the third place, the sense of civic pride among the citizens has been so strong that the town provides a number of amenities for all—not only cultural amenities, but abundant tennis courts, swimming beaches, and the like. These are well

kept, with the result that the rich feel no need of having their own tennis courts, their own bath-houses and strips of beach. And not being over-rich they feel no need of advertising their pride. So they all use the communal facilities. In the fourth place there is a university in Sheridan, and the university has a large group of students from Middle Western farms where social democracy is as natural as breathing.

This equality which still lingers in Sheridan, making the half-hour drive from the huge neighboring city seem a bridge between two worlds, is a vital part of American culture. But what of the city, the antithesis to Sheridan? If the giant city grows and flourishes, Sheridan will die. And the city, with its skyscrapers, millionaires, gangsters, and polyglot proletariat—is not the city typical of America, too? Yes; but it is not typical of American culture. It is my thesis that the city stands for the other America—big, loud, and un-self-confident as a new boy at school, but not half so native as Sheridan, not half so well rooted, and in the end not half so strong.

Since Sheridan survived 1929, it may never be engulfed. It is still threatened, but its old character is not yet gone. Perhaps Sheridan will turn back and save the institutions which gave it that character, instead of accepting its metropolitan doom. If it does, the moment when the tide turns, the moment when the city stops encroaching on its tiny neighbor, will be an important moment in the story of American culture, and an important moment in world history. In order to show how I can hope for such an event, I must explain what I mean by the phrase, "American culture." In common speech the phrase has little meaning, or else a meaning that is clear but trivial.

III

In the advertising columns of the *American Magazine* for November, 1934, there is a sample of the popular use of the word, culture. "At Palm Beach and Nassau, California and Cannes," reads the caption under a picture, "every year they flock by scores—those smart cultured women with enough money to indulge the slightest whim. And the number of them who use Listerine Tooth Paste is amazing."

And in the *Saturday Evening Post* for December 1, 1934, in an article called "An Industrial Design for Living," the following sentences occur: "Our nation has been on the receiving end of a cultural movement

the like of which would be hard to imagine. All the colleges, all the magazines, the newspapers and the movies, have been indoctrinating people with the idea of beauty in person, in clothing and in background, until they have developed an appetite for such things beyond ordinary comprehension."

Here we have two of the commonest uses of the word: culture as female wealth and smartness, and culture as a consumer's demand for beauty, a demand that has been whipped up by "all the colleges, all the magazines, the newspapers and the movies." The first use of the word is silly enough to be harmless. People are in no danger of believing that a cultured nation is a nation composed chiefly of beautiful bare young women "with enough money to indulge the slightest whim." But the second use is evil, for it leads to misunderstanding. It is a form of the heresy that culture is a thing which can be stored in libraries and museums. Culture, in this sense, is not a way of life but something you learn at school, like plane geometry, or something you catch, like measles. If you have learned it or caught it, if you have "been on the receiving end of a cultural movement," then you will know about beauty and will want some of it. And if you want beauty you will go to the shops where it is for sale and buy as much as you can afford, or as much as you have room for at home.

This is the industrial-commercial view of culture, as is made clear in the *Saturday Evening Post* article, which continues as follows: "The old-time pioneers who pushed beyond the Alleghanies felt that they had a continent to explore, and, if your mind runs that way, to exploit. But we who came after them, or rather, out of them, have lived into a time when the pioneering has come into something richer than a green continent. It is a fertile region that lies somewhere between the human intelligence and the human soul. Developing it will provide plenty of work for all the machines that can be contrived and all the labor that exists."

The last sentence is perfect. The "pioneers" are done with exploring North America, and they find themselves with quite a lot of redundant machinery on their hands. So they decide to "develop" the "fertile region that lies somewhere between the human intelligence and the human soul." By "developing" it they mean making it "beauty-conscious"; they mean teaching it to want goods and gadgets that have "eye-appeal." If you are in the market for goods with "eye-appeal," you have culture. Your "fertile

region" has been developed. Of course, as the inventors turn out more and more machines, we shall have to get more and more cultured. In time, even our tooth paste and our telephones will have "eye-appeal." Everything we buy will be beautiful, and we'll buy an astonishing lot (for yesterday's eye-appeal can always be made into today's eye-sore). In this way America should become the most cultured nation in the world's history.

This industrial-commercial view of culture, which sees it as the next field for industry "to explore, and, if your mind runs that way, to exploit," flourished during the years when Big Business was glorified. During the 1920's there were people who thought that as soon as Mr. Hoover finished solving the problem of poverty, Americans would apply sound business principles to the Higher Life and would shortly be delivering large packages of beauty and truth to every taxpayer. Today such people, though less hopeful about Mr. Hoover, still think that culture can be "laid on" like gas or water. They believe that if only a group of technocrats, or bureaucrats, or commissars, would organize things so that the whole working population would have mechanical jobs for four hours a day and freedom for twenty, the national demand for Higher Life would be too surprising for words. They may be right, for what they mean by higher life is reading "good books," going to concerts and picture galleries, and listening to lectures. None of these pastimes has any necessary connection with culture. The American public, for example, might spend its time reading Greek and Roman literature, looking at Italian and Dutch paintings, hearing German and Russian music, and attending lectures by visiting playwrights from Vienna and Budapest. The result would probably be a nation of prigs. I see no reason to think it would be a nation with culture. "If I read as many books as that man," said Hobbes, "I'd be as big a fool as he." "Beware of the man who would rather read than write," warns Bernard Shaw. Beware of the nation whose culture means admiring the creativeness of other people.

The Pittsburg *Sun-Telegraph* for February 25, 1935, ran the following editorial:

Andrew W. Mellon, former Secretary of the Treasury, spent more than \$4,000,000 to buy six famous paintings, five of them from Soviet

Russia. He planned to build a great art museum in Washington to house his famous collection of pictures, worth about \$19,000,000.

One by one he bought at huge prices great works of art from European collections in order to realize his dream of making Washington the art capital of the world.

Mr. Mellon is proof of the utter falsity of the conception, once so widespread abroad, of American millionaires as ruthless money-grubbing materialists.

In no other nation on earth, at no other time in history, have great individual fortunes so generously served the permanent scientific and artistic interests of mankind as here.

This is the perfect expression of false, colonial, imitative culture. The thought that Washington could become "the art capital of the world" by becoming the storehouse for a lot of Italian and Flemish and Byzantine paintings is a thought that does no honor to the human mind. Just as a city is a place where people live, not a place where they are buried, so an art capital is a place where art is produced, not a place where it is put away.

If the industrial-commercial concept of culture is dismissed to its proper home in the advertising columns, how can the word be redefined so that it can throw light on American life? As a prelude to trying such a redefinition, American life must be placed in a scheme of world history.

IV

Until quite recently, the prevailing theory of history was the one devised to fit the nineteenth century theory of progress. It showed man as advancing, in the course of a few thousand years, from a shocking and brutal-looking ancestor with long hair and a club to something quite commendable, like Mr. H. G. Wells. The advance was usually shown in two parts: first the advance from cave-man to classical civilization; then, after a brief relapse during the Dark Ages, a further advance to the mechanical triumphs of the modern world. The picture is a perfect example of false conclusions drawn from facts which are true but inadequate.

It is true that man was once a primitive nomad, possessing none of the arts of civilization. It is true that man, in certain parts of the world, has

now become something which may fairly be symbolized by Mr. Wells. It is true that from our point of view Mr. Wells is more engaging than the cave-man, which means that there has been progress. But what is quite untrue is the assumption underlying so much progressive thought, that this advance has been along one fairly constant line, that millennium by millennium the progress has continued, and that it can be described in some such terms as a steadily increasing power to control the physical environment, or a steadily increasing store of real and final knowledge, or a steadily increasing friendliness toward larger and larger groups of people—a friendliness that began with the family unit and is destined to end by embracing the world state. This outmoded nineteenth century view of progress was summarized by Woodrow Wilson when he told an audience that “all through the centuries there has been this slow painful struggle forward, forward, up, up, a little at a time, along the entire incline, the interminable way.”

It is a comforting view, for it suggests that if man refrains from committing suicide he will grow better and better until the time comes when he will have every reason for self-satisfaction. Such a theory of history transplants the Garden of Eden from the past, where it provoked nostalgia, into the future, where it provokes a lively hope. Heaven is transplanted out of space, where it was unattainable except by the grace of God, into time, where it becomes merely a question of patience, like waiting for the next train. But for all its soothing qualities the theory is now dying. It has been mortally hurt by the work done during the last thirty years in archeology, anthropology, comparative religion and literature. Its place is being taken by a more complicated and less flattering view, which has at least the merit that it can be reconciled to the known facts.

The old division of history into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern is being scrapped. It was a division which cut straight across the facts, separating events that belonged together and joining others that had nothing in common. Instead of one long gratifying advance, with ourselves as the latest and most improved model of humanity, what history really shows is a series of high Cultures passing through similar stages of growth and decay. In China, in Mexico, in India, in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, and now at last in our own West, we can trace this pattern. Out of a group of farming settlements a new culture is born, no one knows why. The challenge of life is

suddenly met by a new affirmation. A new statement is made of man's old faith that life has a meaning and that the meaning is good. In our case, in the years between 500 and 1000 A. D. this birth took place in Western Europe. The Christian affirmation defined itself; it permeated the spirit of Western man; it began to find expression in social institutions which were to form the thought and manners of a continent.

The new culture, of course, may be much influenced by the remains of a previous civilization which occupied the same, or neighboring, lands—just as the emerging Western culture was influenced by the Classical. But the basic affirmation of the new culture, though it may be built on many foreign contributions, will be its own, will be characteristic. The Christianity of the West clearly rests on Hebrew, Classical, and Arabian foundations. Yet the religion of Western man is not just a version of a religion from Asia Minor, or from any other part of the dying Roman world. It is a new thing, born with Western culture and unlikely to survive it.

No historian can say why this new thing came to birth during those centuries, and in just that part of the world. But once the thing is born (and assuming that it is given a chance to grow, that it is not wiped out by force), the historian can predict certain stages through which it is likely to pass. He can predict, in the first place, that the life-drama of the new Culture will take the form of a conflict between the deep instinctive faith which is the essence of the Culture and an abstractly rationalizing self-destructive element which is a feature of man's mind. He can predict that religion (the expression of this deep faith) will dominate in the early period of the Culture, that art and abstract thought will for a time be religion's servant. (For Western man, this is the period from the birth of his Culture to about the end of the thirteenth century.)

The historian can predict that a little later there will be a second stage, where a more even balance is attained. The inquiring, self-probing mind becomes steadily more confident. Art and thought are secularized, though they are still for the most part in harmony with religion. They have not yet begun their final task of tearing up their own roots. (This is the period corresponding, roughly, to the years 1300-1700 in Western Europe.)

The historian could also predict the character of the third period—which has proved the last great period of every previous Culture. In this

period the perilous balance between faith and critical thought slowly breaks down. The questioning, nihilistic mind, which in the beginning was religion's servant, and in the second period its ally, becomes its master. The instinctive faith weakens; the critical and analytical power is left undirected. In its new freedom it knows a burst of energy. The ardor of the human spirit, which was once shared between heaven and earth, is now lavished solely on practical ends. The results are impressive. In every culture this is the time of imperial expansion, of great world cities, of mechanical triumphs: the giant buildings of Luxor, the Great Wall of China, the straight proud Roman roads across the body of Europe, the straight proud steel belittling the American sky. This is the time when man learns to do so many striking things that his brain is warped with his own grandeur and he makes the mistake of thinking he understands the forces he is using. This is the period reached by Western man in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The historian could go still further. On the basis of the same analogy with other cultures he could predict what is likely to be the mood and meaning of Western man's next stage. There is clearly no proof to these predictions; they are not a doom imposed upon us; but they are a useful warning, for hitherto none of the many cultures of which we have knowledge has escaped this final stage. Seeing what happened in the period comparable to our twentieth century in the Classical world, in the Cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China, the historian can say that instead of being on the verge of a final triumph Western man is probably on the verge of despair. For the crowning work of man's criticism, having discredited the thought and religion of the past, is to discredit the mind that criticizes. At the moment when intelligence dreams it is about to reach out and explain all things, it wakes to the annihilating theory that explanations are relative, that one is often as good—or as bad—as another. The mind which has dissolved the basic faith on which the whole culture rested, ends by dissolving itself, ends in Classical scepticism, ends in Eastern despair, ends in European nihilism and relativity. For the rootless intellect means nothing, leads nowhere, and cannot even sustain the will to struggle. At the highest point of the Civilization's physical achievement, this poisonous doubt strikes it, and it falls.

When a people have reached this stage of disillusionment, the rest of their story can be imagined. They can still do all their mechanical tricks, but the heart has gone out of such tricks except for the silly few who can enjoy themselves doing nothing but making money. The old faith in religion has faded under the attacks of the critical mind; the new faith in reason has proved a fraud under the self-slaughtering honesty of the same mind. And then appears one of the strangest but most often repeated facts of history. Man is stricken with sterility. In his giant cities he finds himself too bored or too un zestful even to breed normally. Rome was weak with depopulation long before the barbarians pulled her down. Just as the birth of every culture-cycle is marked by a new affirmation of life, the end is marked by a hospitality to death. Man lies down tired in the midst of his marvels. His numbers dwindle, his cities stand half empty, and once again the beasts of the wilderness prowl among ruined buildings.

Spengler reminds us that "Samarra was abandoned by the tenth century; Pataliputra, Asoka's capital, was an immense and completely uninhabited waste of houses when the Chinese traveller, Hsinan-tang, visited it about A. D. 635." And he cites a whole group of late Classical writers—Polybius, Strabo, Pausanias, Dio Chrysostom, Avienus—who tell "of old, renowned cities in which the streets have become lines of empty crumbling shells, where the cattle browse in forum and gymnasium, and the amphitheatre is a sown field, dotted with emergent statues and herms." And Mr. Charles Francis Atkinson adds that in the days of the Roman decline, "the amphitheatres of Nîmes and Arles were filled up by mean townlets that used the outer wall as their fortifications." The turn of the population-tide in the Western world is clearly fore-shadowed today.

In succeeding ages, after such a decline has run its course, the dwindled population takes refuge in the countryside, where, if not attacked from without, it multiplies until it pushes on the limits of subsistence, until it reaches the state of the teeming agricultural East.

A civilization, therefore, may simply fall into inner desuetude, enduring for milleniums as the booty of successive conquerors, like Egypt, or China, or India. But a civilization may also die suddenly, not merely looted but murdered, as happened to Mexico at the hands of the Spaniards. Here was one of the most dramatic confrontations in history: an old civilization

where doubt and relativity had clearly done their corrosive work, and a group of energetic bandits from a world that still had trust in itself.

Tenochtitlan was an imperial city, on a scale that Western man was not to create for centuries. "We were amazed," wrote Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who fought with Cortez, "and said that it was like the enchantment they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and *cues* and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream. . . I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about." But the simple Spaniard was wrong. Such things had been seen and heard of many times before: in Imperial Rome, in Baghdad and Tell-el-Amarna, in the world-cities of the last years of every civilization. They were to be seen in the Western world after another four hundred years, by which time London and Paris and New York had taken on shapes that would have startled Cortez's soldiers quite as much as did Tenochtitlan—and by which time, in certain deep and decisive matters, the point of view of London and Paris and New York was closer to that of the Aztec city than to anything that Cortez's men could have understood.

Montezuma, for example, said to Cortez, "Throughout all time we have worshipped our own gods, and thought they were good, as no doubt yours are." Diaz tells us the Spaniards were amazed at such a remark; but a New York literary critic, in 1935, quotes Montezuma with approval, just after calling Spanish Catholicism "a provincial religion." And the critic represents his age faithfully. It is right that he should approve of Montezuma's relativism: world-city is talking to world-city, and they speak the same language. Montezuma was a "civilized" man. He knew that all truths are relative, that all the high eternal Gods have ruled over comparatively small areas in space and time. He knew, therefore, that it would be banal to fight over religion. But the fierce and greedy Spaniards knew nothing of the sort. They knew that their religion was *true*—not true for them or true for the sixteenth century, but true for all men forever. So they fell on the tired cosmopolitans of that ageing city, and a handful of men abolished one of the world's marvels.

The New York literary man cannot approve of such self-confidence. He finds it definitely provincial.

Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence
 Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs,
 En composant des acrostiches indolents
 D'un style d'or où la langueur du soleil danse.

Doubtless there were many Aztec nobles who felt just that way.

Là-bas on dit qu'il est de longs combats sanglants.

But why should a "civilized" man stir himself to a lot of vulgar fighting?

V

This cyclical view of history need not breed pessimism. Spengler, the great popularizer of the view, has used it to vent a pathological despair. As if driven to expiate some enormous guilt he offers the whole Western world as sacrifice to Fate, and he knows no words too impolite for the victim who demurs. With a scream of italics and exclamation marks, Spengler falls upon him: This is what *has* to be! History cannot be interfered with! Bare your throats and *don't argue!*

I should think, however, that a sincere Christian would be bound to argue, would be bound to insist that a pattern may have repeated itself eight or ten times and still be only a pattern, not a doom. For instance, it is reasonable to predict a sorry end for a man who has become a steady, sodden drunkard; but it would be stupid to say the man was doomed to such an end. He might have a religious conversion and become a saint. The only safe prediction we can make is that if nothing unusual happens the man will die a sot. Similarly, the only safe prediction about our cosmopolitan civilization is that if nothing unusual happens it will not turn out to be the start of a splendid new era, but the start of another dreary decline. In Europe, the unusual happening might be a revival of Christianity; in America it might be a strengthening of our native, as opposed to our colonial tradition.

While taking this hopeful view it would be wrong to ignore the warnings implicit in the new theory of history. It is right to reject determinism; it is right to insist that if we have the moral energy we can still save our

Christian civilization from the fate which struck all the great civilizations that have gone down to the grave; but it is wrong to let ourselves be soothed by the silly dream that good must somehow triumph in the end since man has already progressed all the way from the mud to Mr. Henry Ford. Man has certainly progressed; but the point of the story told by modern archeology and history is that man has also declined, and with sinister regularity. He has not pushed steadily on, with a few temporary setbacks. On the contrary, he has risen again and again to what has seemed the top of his powers, and fallen again and again to a level not far above where he began. There are signs today that he may be preparing to fall once more, and though my own view of America's future is a hopeful one, it would be stupid not to take these signs into account, not to present my hope against the background of a real danger.

The great dividing line in the history of a high culture (such as the Classical, the Egyptian, or that of Western man) is the line between the second and third periods. On the one side of that line there is still a fruitful tension between instinct and intellect; on the other side the balance has been destroyed and the nihilistic mind has silenced the faith on which the whole culture rested. Spengler uses the word, Culture, for the period before that fatal division, and the word, Civilization, for the period that follows. The use of the words in this sense is arbitrary; but the distinction he makes is useful for an understanding of America today.

In these terms, Sheridan stands for American Culture, the giant city for Civilization. According to the pessimists, who have seized on the cyclical theory of history to justify their best fears, the giant city must win. And it is true that in the past, once the period of civilization has been reached, the clock has never turned back. The giant world-city, with its cosmopolitanism, its scepticism, its falling birth-rate, its lack of morals, its imitative and then its decadent art—in the past, each time this recurring prodigy has appeared, the stage has been set for an age of Caesars, of wars and dictatorships and aimless crowds kept quiet by doles, or by bread and circuses. In every characteristic detail, we seem to be giving our own Western version of the dejecting picture. Where our religious life, for example, has not been killed by scepticism, it shows signs of decaying into an eclectic superstition. Like the Romans who brought Isis and Ariman to the Tiber,

many Westerners today flirt with Buddhism, or follow Hindu fakirs, or make strange mixtures of their own, adding a dash of neo-platonism to a smattering of Lao-Tse.

There are good reasons for pessimism. And I agree with the most despairing that if Civilization (the point of view of the world-city) became dominant in America, if the judgments, the ambitions, the interests, the conditions and habits of life, represented by Chicago and New York became the standard of the country, we would be old without ever having been young. We would be as old as Europe, but ours would be a graceless old age. No maturity, no serene memories, no wisdom—only decrepitude and loss of purpose. We should not be a rich culture drawing to an end with dignity; we should be just another colonial nation going down hill with (or perhaps before) the parent stock, without ever having been anything on our own. We should deserve the jibe flung at us by Mr. Belloc in a magnificent passage where he gives the European Christian's answer to the pessimism that assails Europe:

Our Europe cannot perish. Her religion—which is also mine—has in it those victorious energies of defence which neither merchants nor philosophers can understand, and which are yet the prime condition of establishment. Europe, though she must always repel attacks from within and from without, is always secure; the soul of her is a certain spirit, at once reasonable and chivalric. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. . .

Her component peoples have merged and remerged. Her particular famous cities have fallen down. Her soldiers have believed the world to have lost all, because a battle turned against them, Hittin or Leipzig. Her best has at times grown poor and her worst rich. Her colonies have seemed dangerous for a moment from the insolence of their power, and then again (for a moment) from the contamination of their decline. . . She will certainly remain.

It is a proud boast. And even the attack on America is not unworthy. An American who has lived long abroad knows too well why foreigners take this view. They hear nothing about us except news from our world-cities, plays and books about our world-cities (or else plays and books and news

about our country-side from the point of view of our world-cities). They know America as a Civilization; America as an attempt at a Culture they do not know at all. And how should they? After six years in London I began to wonder, myself, whether there was such an America, or whether I had made it up and called it memory.

Why should Europe respect us as a big-city Civilization? As a Civilization we are derivative and second-hand; we have the instability of people who are not themselves. As a Civilization we are somebody else's Culture grown old. But we, the people, are not old. And the combination, though surprising, does not breed confidence. In art, in talk, in lack of morals, in cosmopolitan nihilism, New York is old. As old as Vienna, yet as vital as a gold-rush camp. The vitality would be attractive if it were lavished on something young; it is bizarre when it is lavished on decay.

There is no capital in Europe where cynicism and defeatism are more constant than in New York. But in Europe they are negative qualities, as fits their nature. In Europe they are a mood of tired disdain. In New York they are boyish and positive as battle-cries. In New York men announce their ironies with a kind of hopeful ardor. The cartoonist, James Thurber, is an illustration. In Europe men are puzzled by Mr. Thurber. Not because they are strangers to his withering view of humanity. Thurber's men and women—small, misshapen, and malignant; sub-human because they have no trace of purpose, no memory of hope; sub-bestial because they have none of the dignity of beasts—Europe is accustomed to this view of human nature. From the early Huysmans to Anatole France to Aldous Huxley, half the cleverest minds have been perfecting it for seventy years. But what perplexes Europe is to find this scornful picture combined with such gaiety. Through all these deadly libels there runs a nursery touch. Enormous rabbits, fantastic misplaced seals, huge comforting dogs—if the men and women could be expunged, these drawings would be decorations for a child's bedroom. The mixture, to someone born in Mr. Thurber's world, is telling. But to many Europeans the mixture is merely distressful. They have their own picture of what age and disillusion should resemble. They do not like to know there can be such things as ancient, contemptuous children.

The mixture of moods that is found in a Thurber drawing is characteristic of New York. These boisterous pessimists, these hearty drunk-

ards, these perverts who declare their barrenness with a happy grin—they make New York an exciting place, a puzzling place. I can see why Europeans should enjoy it, why they should marvel at it. But I cannot see why they should think well of it. I cannot blame them for predicting, like Mr. Belloc, a swift decline.

In Europe, if the soul is growing old, if hope and faith are dying, there is something to fall back on: the eternal tradition of the land, a religion that still makes the lives of millions, a memory of many disasters weathered. But to be old unnaturally, without these memories, without this background, is to be unstable. And Europe, knowing only those spots in America that suffer from abnormal, derivative old age, rightly judges us unstable. Civilization, in America, is derivative. It is colonial, and hence rootless. New York is colonial and rootless. But our provinces are not colonial. American Culture, so far as there has been one, is not colonial. Sheridan is a new thing in the world, a product of American soil. But in all essentials, Chicago and New York are as old as Luxor—and just about as important to the future.

These generalizations on Culture and the modern world cannot be proved. They are not offered as revelations. They are offered to suggest the following thoughts about our own Culture: in America we have the beginning of a Culture. It is derived from Europe, of course, and has the same ancestors as the Culture of Europe; but it has been here long enough to take on a native character. If it were let alone we might hope for an American contribution to history. It has not been left alone. It has been overlaid, and hampered increasingly, by an alien imitative old age, a colonial-minded old age. The story of America today is the story of the struggle between these two forces. And there are reasons for hoping that the native America may win.

If these generalizations are true, then it is a primary duty for Americans today to be nationally self-conscious, to seek an answer to the question, What is America? If we cannot answer that, we cannot hope to make the real America come true. And if we do nothing, if we drift with the tide of modern history, our country might as well never have been founded. For the tide of modern history, at least in Europe, is not a pretty tide.